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Medieval Political Philosophy in a Sixteenth-Century Wallachian Mirror of Princes: *The Teachings of Neagoe Basarab to His Son Theodosie*

MARIANA GOINA

'The truth is that in discourses of this sort we should not seek novelties, for in these discourses it is not possible to say what is paradoxical or incredible or outside the circle of accepted belief.' (Isocrates)¹

In the following pages, I offer a new perspective on the sixteenth-century Wallachian treatise on education, the *Teachings of Neagoe Basarab to His Son Theodosie*, in which I venture to move beyond previous approaches that have been structured around the issues of 'authorship' or the 'originality' of the text. In seeking to prove (or disprove) that the prince himself was the author of the work, most historians have approached the text as a historical source for the politics and ideas of the period, rather than as a piece of medieval literature that should be considered in its literary and cultural context.² Instead, I offer a comparative study of the text, placing it in the framework of other medieval *Specula* originating both from the Byzantine world and from Western Christendom, in the hope of clarifying the place of this sixteenth-century Wallachian work within the frame of the literary genre to which it belongs.

The *Teachings of Neagoe Basarab to His Son Theodosie* was written at the beginning of the sixteenth century for the son of the ruling prince,

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¹ Isocrates, *To Nicocles*, ed. George Norlin, Cambridge, 1961, p. 63.

² I am indebted to Professor Martyn Rady for this fortunate formulation.

Neagoe Basarab (1512–21). Dating from the same period as both *The Education of a Christian Prince* by Erasmus and Machiavelli's *Prince*, the work remains indebted to the vision that the exercise of government should reside first and foremost in a continuous observance of Christian virtues. For the author, as for the Byzantine and early Western writers of political treatises, the welfare of the state has its foundation in the moral qualities of the prince.

The historical context of the work

The medieval principality of Wallachia seems to have risen to statehood in the first half of the fourteenth century through the unification of several feudal structures loosely attached to the Hungarian kingdom.³ The Orthodox principality was ruled by princes belonging to the Basarab dynasty, without any system of succession through primogeniture: any son (legitimate or natural) of the prince could claim the throne. Even if we accept the hypothesis that the Wallachian princes had strong political authority in the early period, their authority had by the reign of Mircea the Old (1386–1418) begun to be circumscribed by the rising political importance of the nobility.⁴ From the early fifteenth century, the increasing pressure of the Ottoman Empire and the latter's rivalry with the Hungarian kingdom in their claims to dominate the politics of Wallachia resulted in an endless struggle between the various Ottoman or Hungarian protégés from the two branches of the Basarab dynasty, the Dănești and the Drăculești, as they disputed the Wallachian throne.⁵ Consequently, in the century preceding the reign of Neagoe Basarab, the throne of Wallachia was held by fifteen princes, with an average reign totalling no more than six years. Furthermore, each of these reigns was fragmented by periods in which some contending prince gained power. In the civil war between the two factions, the political role of a few noble families, and particularly the Craiovești, increased to an unprecedented scale as their support often decided who would progress to the throne.⁶

³ Gheorghe Popa-Lisseanu (ed.), *Cronica pictată de la Viena*, in *Izvoarele istoriei românilor*, vol. 11, Bucharest, 1937, pp. 22, 76, 89. See also, Martyn Rady, *Nobility, Land and Service in Medieval Hungary*, London, 2000, p. 92; Mihai Bărbulescu, Dennis Deletant, Keith Hitchins, Șerban Papacostea and Pompiliu Theodor, *Istoria României*, Bucharest, 2002, p. 128.

⁴ Gheorghe Brătianu, *Sfatul domnesc și adunarea stărilor*, Bucharest, 1995 (first edition 1977), p. 69.

⁵ Ștefan Ștefănescu, Camil Mureșanu, et al. (eds), *Istoria Românilor*, vol. 4, Bucharest, 2001, p. 349.

⁶ Brătianu, *Sfatul domnesc și adunarea stărilor*, pp. 69, 71.

Neagoe Basarab seems to have been born into the Craiovești family and to have come to the throne with their help, being one of the first princes who gained the Wallachian throne without belonging to either branch of the Basarab dynasty. He styled himself the son of Basarab the Young (1476–82) and took the surname Basarab.⁷

Most of the known information about Neagoe Basarab comes from a hagiographical work commissioned by him and written by Gavril Protus, head of the Athos community.⁸ While the date of Neagoe's birth is not completely certain, it is known that he died in 1521, at the age of around forty, as ruler of Wallachia. Married to a Serbian princess, a descendant of the Branković family, Neagoe acted as a patron and supporter of Orthodox culture in the areas of the former Byzantine Empire. His most famous foundation, and undoubtedly the best known monument of the Wallachian Middle Ages, is the Curtea de Argeș church. Similarly, the Bistrița monastery, placed under the patronage of his family, was one of the cultural centres of the epoch.

The cultural context of the Wallachian principality at the beginning of the sixteenth century suggests that it lay on the periphery of the post-Byzantine world, firmly anchored in the heritage of Byzantium but with a very late and restricted adoption of written culture.⁹ After the fall of the Byzantine Empire some Wallachian princes took over the role of the vanquished emperors as the protectors of Orthodox culture. It was presumably out of a wish to emulate the Byzantine Emperors that the Wallachian prince ordered an advice book to be composed for his offspring and successor. However, the cultural activities of Neagoe Basarab as a church builder and commissioner of original works are remarkable even in this context. The *Teachings* are already exceptional, as, with the single exception of a religious hymn (early fifteen century), there is no surviving religious or literary work known to have been produced in Wallachia prior to Neagoe Basarab's reign.

⁷ Neagoe Basarab's origins are controversial, and some authors believed that he was not a descendent of the Craiovești family but an illegitimate son of the previous prince Basarab the Young (1476–82). I follow here the opinion of George Brătianu as expressed in *Sfatul domnesc și adunarea stărilor*, p. 71. See also Ștefănescu, *Istoria Românilor*, vol. 4, p. 407.

⁸ For more information see Vasile Grecu (ed.), *Viața Sfântului Nifon. O redactare grecească inedită*, Bucharest, 1944.

⁹ For a general overview of the persistence of Byzantine influence in the area after the fall of the Byzantine Empire, see Ihor Ševčenko, 'Byzantium and the Slavs', *Harvard Ukrainian Studies*, 8, 1984, 3–4, pp. 289–303 (pp. 297, 298). See also, Mariana Goina, *The Uses of the Written Word in Moldavia and Wallachia (Fourteenth to Sixteenth Centuries)*, unpublished PhD thesis, Central European University, Budapest, 2010.

The source material

The manuscripts of the *Teachings* preserve the work in three languages: Middle Bulgarian Slavonic,¹⁰ Greek¹¹ and Romanian.¹² The Romanian version is the only one that transmits the complete text and it is considered by the majority of researchers as a translation of a Slavonic original.

The work appears to be one of the lengthiest mirrors of princes, especially in the Byzantine cultural context. This profuse and highly religious work is divided into two parts. The first is a patchwork of extensive religious excerpts taken from the Scriptures, the works of such Church Fathers as John Chrysostom, Ephrem the Syrian and John of the Ladder, and secular works such as *Barlaam and Josaphat* and the *Physiologus*. This compilation of excerpts offers a collection of 'exemplary readings' intended to illustrate the virtues expected from a good Christian prince as well as to lay down the principles of a theocratic monarchy.

The core of the second part aims to instruct the future prince on the more technical practicalities of government. In doing so, it touches upon the classical issues that feature in many other Byzantine or Western *specula principum*: justice, diplomacy and the conduct of war, the administration of the kingdom and relations between the ruler and the aristocracy. It also comprises specific recommendations for the proper behaviour of the prince in public and private life under titles such as: 'the suitable manner for rulers to dine, or how to eat and how to drink.' However, its structure also includes a chapter dedicated to the veneration of icons, and one which reproduces the funeral oration of the prince at the re-burial of his mother.¹³

¹⁰ Only seventeen fragments survive from the Middle Bulgarian Slavonic version. It has been dated to between around 1519 and 1538. For the critical edition of the text, see George Mihailă (ed.), *Învățăturile lui Neagoe Basarab către fiul său Theodosie*, Bucharest, 1996. Hereafter I will refer to this as the 'Slavonic' version.

¹¹ The Greek version is preserved in two manuscripts which cover only the second half of the work. Its *terminus ante quem* is before 1530. For more information, see Leandros Vranoussis, 'Les conseils attribués au Prince Neagoe (1512–1521) et les manuscrits autographes de leur auteur grec (ou la «question homérique» de la littérature slavо-roumaine enfin résolue)', *Actes du IIe congrès international des Études du Sud-Est Européen*, vol. 4, Athens, 1978, pp. 377–87. For an edition of the Greek version, see Vasile Grecu (ed.), *Învățăturile lui Neagoe Basarab: Domnul Țării Românești (1512–1521)*, Bucharest, 1942.

¹² The Romanian is the only complete version of the work. It survives in nine different copies dating from the seventeenth to the early nineteenth centuries. For the Romanian version, see Florica Moisil and Dan Zamfirescu (eds), *Învățăturile lui Neagoe Basarab către fiul său Theodosie*, with a modern Romanian translation by George Mihailă, Bucharest, 1970.

¹³ The chapter entitled, 'The letter of Ioan Neagoe Basarab to the relics of his mother Neaga and of his sons Petru and Ioan and of his daughter Anghelina', seems to be an independent work. It belongs to the genre of funeral orations widespread in Byzantine

Neagoe's approach in the second part continues to interweave moral and religious considerations, with practical instructions mixed in with extensive quotes from the Scriptures and the works of Church Fathers.

The work did not pass unnoticed. Only a generation after the death of the Wallachian prince, a Greek version of Neagoe's mirror was sent by the tsar of Russia, Ivan the Terrible, to the Patriarch of Constantinople. Apparently in order to enhance his own prestige, the Russian tsar changed the title of the work to the *Teachings of Barlaam to His Son Ivan*, alleging it to have been written by his father.¹⁴ Also, a separate adaptation of some sections of the *Teachings* into demotic Greek has been discovered at the Dionysiou Monastery on Mount Athos, attributed to the rhetorician George of Enos.¹⁵ The relatively high number of copies surviving in Romanian translation suggests a recurrent interest in the work in the Romanian lands up to the early nineteenth century.¹⁶

Throughout the modern period, the work has attracted close attention. The discovery of manuscripts in three different languages has in particular prompted heated debates extending over more than a century as to where, by whom and in which language the archetype was written, the whole issue becoming in the process the 'Homeric question' of Romanian literature.¹⁷ By now it is known when the work was written, and a general agreement concerning the original language has been reached, but the question of authorship is still a subject of debate.¹⁸ It is not my aim here to take a stance on the issue of authorship. Therefore, if I use the term, 'Neagoe's mirror', I mean it only in the sense that the work was commissioned by the prince, without seeking to imply that Neagoe himself was the author.¹⁹

The discussion of the ideas present in the work has hitherto been subordinated to the aims of dating the work, discovering its original language and identifying the author.²⁰ The manuscripts have been subject

literature. See, for instance, J. Chrysostomides (ed.), *Manuel II Palaeologus: Funeral Orations on his Brother Theodor*, Thessalonika, 1985.

¹⁴ For more information, see Mihăilă (ed.), *Învățăturile lui Neagoe Basarab*, p. 98.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

¹⁶ For more details, see Dan Zamfirescu, 'Tradiția manuscrisă și edițiile versiunii românești', in *Neagoe Basarab și Învățăturile către fiul său Theodosie: Probleme controversate*, Bucharest, 1973. See also, Alexandru Dușu, 'Le miroir des princes dans la culture roumaine', *Revue des Études Sud-Est Européennes*, 6, 1968, pp. 439–79.

¹⁷ The expression was coined by Russo. See Demostene Russo, *Studii Byzantine-Române*, Bucharest, 1907, pp. 14–15.

¹⁸ See *ibid.*, notes 14 and 15.

¹⁹ For a similar opinion in the recent historiography, see Ștefănescu, *Istoria Românilor*, vol. 4, p. 671.

²⁰ See, for instance, Petre S. Năsturel, 'Remarque sur les versions grecque, slave et roumaine des "Enseignements du prince de Valachie Neagoe Basarab à son fils Théodose"',

to close textual criticism and to comparative study with other contemporary sources but have not been considered from a literary perspective. For many scholars, solving the issue of authorship and defending the thesis that the prince himself was its technical author seems to have assumed a patriotic and national purpose.²¹ This has resulted in the sixteenth-century text being presented as highly original and exceptional, the expression of a novel Wallachian political philosophy.²²

Although scholars often made passing reference to the genre of the *speculum principis*, its characteristics were not taken into consideration when evaluating Neagoe's mirror. The literary genre of the mirror of princes illustrates perhaps in the highest degree the specific traits of the 'alterity' of medieval literature: its didacticism, its repetitiveness and its rhetorical catalogue-like character. Following C. S. Lewis, I see the *Teachings*' 'endless didactic digressions' as a feature typical of the literature of the Middle Ages, enjoyed by the medieval reader precisely because 'they told him what he already knew, and because it satisfied him deeply to find each thing in its correct place in the world-model'.²³ This *alterity* challenges the very axioms upon which our modern understanding of literature is built, axioms such as 'the written character of tradition, the singularity of authorship' and above all, 'the unity between the author and the work'.²⁴ Consequently, I offer a reading of the *Teachings* where I discard the modern assumptions upon which the questions of authorship and authenticity are built and move toward an analysis of the text using a comparative approach, in which it is placed within the context of its genre.

The status of the prince: the political philosophy of the mirror

The *Teachings* is structured around the main themes of a traditional advice book in which monarchy is defined as the paramount form of government and the prince as the quintessence of the worldly order, on whose virtuous behaviour depended the well-being of his kingdom.

Byzantinisch-neugriechische Jarhbücher, 21, 1975, pp. 249–71.

²¹ See, for instance, Dan Zamfirescu, 'Pe marginea unei "chestiuni homerice": între Neagoe Basarab și Manuel din Corint', in Dan Zamfirescu, *Contribuții la Istoria Literaturii Române Vechi*, Bucharest, 1981, pp. 305–23; idem, 'Între Neagoe Basarab și Manuel din Corint: Răspuns domnului Petre S. Năsturel', in Zamfirescu, *Contribuții*, pp. 325–48.

²² See, among others, Manole Neagoe, *Neagoe Basarab*, Bucharest, 1971.

²³ C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature*, Cambridge, 1964, p. 200.

²⁴ Hans Robert Jauss, 'The Alterity and Modernity of Medieval Literature', *New Literary History*, 10, 1979, 2, p. 188.

The image of the God-ordained monarchy found in Neagoe's mirror is characteristic of all Byzantine works of the same genre. Its roots are to be found in the principles of Hellenistic kingship as adapted to Christianity by Eusebius of Caesarea.²⁵ In Late Antiquity, the emperor was described both as the image of god and as god on earth; however, with Christianity becoming the state religion, Eusebius and other Christian theologians transformed the emperor into the vice-regent of God, divinely appointed, inspired and endowed with a whole catalogue of virtues.²⁶ Eusebius's formulation of the emperor's central role in the world order was to remain normative throughout Byzantine history and found its expression typically in the literary genre of the *speculum principis*.²⁷ For the Byzantines 'the empire in which they lived was planned by God. There was no need for speculation on alternative forms of society'.²⁸ Byzantine authors affirmed unanimously that there was no authority above the prince except God — seemingly overlooking that many Byzantine emperors were violently removed from their office.²⁹ As George Ostrogorsky noted, 'No one could show more contempt for facts when they contradicted theory than the Byzantines'.³⁰

In Western Christendom, the political changes occurring during the high Middle Ages brought about a new image of the ruler that was distinct from the previously unquestioned Byzantine or Hellenistic pattern. If early medieval political thought concentrated on the person of the prince as God's representative, from the twelfth century onwards medieval political philosophy was concerned with the virtues of the ruler, the relationship of the princely office to the law, and the problem of resistance.³¹ From the fourteenth century onwards, in some Western mirrors the social and historical context began to be addressed.³² However, the Byzantine

²⁵ See Eusebius, *Tricenal Orations*, 1. 6, ed. H. A. Drake, *A Historical Study and New Translation of Eusebius' Tricenal Orations*, Berkeley, CA, 1976, p. 72. See also, Milton V. Anastasios, *The Ancient Greek Sources of Byzantine Absolutism*, Jerusalem, 1965, p. 108.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 95, 108.

²⁷ Francis Dvornik, *Christian Byzantine Political Philosophy: Origins and Background*, vol. 1, Washington, D.C., 1966, p. 206.

²⁸ D. M. Nicol, 'Byzantine Political Thought', in *The Cambridge History of Medieval Political Thought: (350–1450)*, ed. James Henderson Burns, Cambridge, 1988, pp. 55–56.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

³⁰ George Ostrogorsky, 'The Byzantine Emperor and the Hierarchical World Order', *The Slavonic and East European Review*, 35, 1956, 1, pp. 1–14 (p. 8).

³¹ See, for instance, John of Salisbury, *Policraticus: Of the Frivolities of Courtiers and the Footprint of Philosophers*, ed. and trans. Cary J. Nederman, Cambridge, 1990, p. 3.15.

³² Cary J. Nederman, 'The Opposite of Love: Royal Virtue, Economic Prosperity, and Popular Discontent in Fourteenth-Century Political Thought', in *Princely Virtues in*

authors mostly continued to pay tribute to the traditional pattern of their state ideology according to which the earthly empire was a replica of the heavenly model.

In respect to any secular checks on princely power, or of justified resistance against it, Neagoe's sixteenth-century mirror is adamant: even an unrighteous ruler is accountable to God alone. As Neagoe instructed the future prince, the grounds of legitimate power lay in the grace of the Supreme Lord, 'the great Emperor, who has loved us, and has made us Emperors on earth equal to himself'.³³ Consequently, a mortal who sought to oppose his God-anointed ruler would be punished from above:

Therefore nobody, neither servant nor peasant, shall dare to raise his thought with evil intentions, at the devil's bidding, against his emperor, prince and master. For he who shall be tempted to strike unjustly against his master and against his lord, who is favoured and anointed by Jesus Christ, will truly and speedily bring God's just wrath upon his head and the fury of the Living God will descend upon him.³⁴

In this way the Wallachian mirror subscribed to the Byzantine view of the absolute monarch as 'the image of God on Earth', unbounded by the law and accountable only to God's judgment. The variations on this theme developed in some of the Western mirrors, predating Neagoe by more than several centuries, find no reflection at all in the Wallachian *speculum*.

With respect to conditions prevailing in sixteenth-century Wallachia, the theme of an absolute monarch might be viewed, at best, as wishful thinking on the part of the prince, in a context in which the power of the ruler depended heavily on the factions of local nobles and the support of foreign patrons. Surprisingly, there have been some Romanian historians who sought to use the Wallachian mirror as evidence that in Wallachia in the early sixteenth century the authority of the prince was unassailable.³⁵ The best answer to these claims was given by Nicolae Iorga:

the Middle Ages: 1200–1500, eds Cary J. Nederman and István P. Bejczy, Turnhout, 2007, pp. 177–201 (pp. 190–91, 197); Frank Tang, 'Royal Misdemeanour: Princely Virtues and Criticism of the Ruler in Medieval Castile (Juan Gil de Zamora and Álvaro Pelayo)', in Nederman and Bejczy (eds), *Princely Virtues*, pp. 99–121 (pp. 104, 106).

³³ Moisil et al. (eds), *Învățăturile lui Neagoe Basarab*, p. 128.35.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 65.20.

³⁵ Zamfirescu, 'Neagoiana', in *Contribuții*, p. 93; Manole Neagoe, 'Conceptia lui Neagoe Basarab despre domnie', in Manole Neagoe, *Neagoe Basarab*, p. 147.

[Neagoe's claim] that the prince is a gift from above, and that he makes his noblemen and he is not made by them, constitutes a proud assertion but in making such a statement he had to forget all the history of his country from Mircea the Old onwards [1387–1418], a history of struggles, massacres, and savage murders.³⁶

*Princely ethics: not a reformation of institutions but rather a change of heart*³⁷

One of the central concerns of the author of the Wallachian mirror is the pursuit of virtue. As neither subjects nor institutions can provide a check to the power of the monarchy, its limits can only be set by the prince's own ethical behaviour. If there is a force to moderate the excesses and errors of the individuals anointed to the throne, this, for Neagoe, arises from the prescriptions that every Christian should comply with in order to ensure the salvation of his soul.

The detailed elaboration of the list of moral qualities required of a good prince is, certainly, the defining trait of the genre.³⁸ The catalogue of virtues established in late antiquity is found, with very little variation, in most of the Christian *specula*, Byzantine or Western. There are opinions that the Western *specula* produced during the high Middle Ages originated from the late rhetoric textbooks of *Ars Dictaminis* of the early thirteenth century.³⁹ However, I tend to side with Bagge who noted that, although some authors state that the mirrors of the high Middle Ages were a new creation, 'they show striking similarities in content and subject matter' to the earlier *specula*.⁴⁰ The general pattern of virtues suitable for a prince appears, indeed, to evolve in a timeless sphere that seems to link Isocrates to Erasmus.

In the vein of Skinner and Nederman, I would argue that medieval political authors did not contemplate the possibility of change in the institutions that shaped the body politic (and when changes were intended, they were usually presented as a 'revolution', in the sense of a return to the ancient, traditional way of doing things). Since institutions could not be improved, the medieval authors advocated a 'change of heart' on the

³⁶ Nicolae Iorga, *Istoria literaturii religioase a Românilor: pâna la 1688*, Bucharest, 1905, p. 54.

³⁷ Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, vol. 1, Cambridge, 1978, p. 228.

³⁸ Wilhelm Berges, *Die Fuerstenspiegel des hohen und späten Mittelalters*, Leipzig, 1938, p. 343.

³⁹ Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, vol. 1, pp. 33–34.

⁴⁰ Sverre Bagge, *The Political Thought of the King's Mirror*, Odense, 1987, p. 19.

part of the ruling prince. This thesis may explain the essential role that the 'teaching' of virtues had for medieval political thought, and the *raison d'être* of the ubiquitous genre of the mirror of princes.

The traditional scheme of virtues is, unsurprisingly, to be found in Neagoe's mirror. Both parts of the work present the future prince with the array of virtues that were to be pursued and cherished. Like countless other authors of the genre, in the East and the West, Neagoe brought together cardinal and Christian virtues: wisdom, justice, temperance and fortitude as well as piety, philanthropy, charity and humility. The emphasis, however, is always put upon Christian virtues: the main preoccupation of the prince was to serve God and so achieve eternal beatitude. Tending to his kingdom and to the good of the commonwealth was only a secondary goal:

The one who has a pure mind which is the ground of all goods, does not strive only for purity, and fasting, and abstinence, or for prayers and humility, nor does he send his thoughts in various directions, but leaves out all of these and raises his mind up, and dresses himself in God's love, as in a coat of chainmail. He does not care for sovereignty, neither for the principedom, nor for the patriarchate, nor for bishoprics, nor for monasticism, nor for any other worldly things that we care about. Instead, all he strives for is to love God with all his might.⁴¹

Consequently, the virtues most emphasized in Neagoe's text are *piety* and *humility*. Time and time again, the excerpts from the Bible and the Church Fathers, as well as the morals that Neagoe's mirror extracted from them, underline these essential qualities of a prince. Political power stands on a solid basis only when it is grounded on piety. Prayers should precede all actions and God is to be thanked for all accomplishments. Neither success nor failure should be seen as a king's own, but rather as God's punishment or reward for good or bad deeds.⁴²

Clemency, *charity*, and *generosity* once again help a prince to imitate God. To practise charity through the giving of alms means to heap up a treasure in heaven. The good shepherd, a recurrent figure of the genre, is also used in Neagoe's mirror to illustrate his concern for *equity*. He advised the future prince that he should love each of his subjects and take care that all of them benefit from his reign.⁴³

⁴¹ Mihăilă (ed.), *Învățăturile lui Neagoe Basarab*, pp. 262–64.

⁴² Moisil et al. (eds), *Învățăturile lui Neagoe Basarab*, pp. 319, 325, and *passim*.

⁴³ Mihăilă (ed.), *Învățăturile lui Neagoe Basarab*, p. 342.

The prince has, moreover, to behave in accordance with the norms of *prudence* and *temperance* not only in public but in his private life as well. He should restrain the tyranny of his passions and subject them to the yoke of his religious faith and wisdom. Like Agapetus, whose moral exhortations written for Justinian I (527–65) comprised the first *speculum* produced in the Byzantine empire,⁴⁴ Neagoe's mirror asks the future ruler to have a steady and composed mind during all the difficult circumstances in which his position might place him, neither to be elated in times of tranquillity, nor depressed in tempestuous times. The eulogy of wisdom, mind, reason and the checking of the passions is one more link between Western and Eastern moral treatises as well as between Christian and classical ones.

Although the Wallachian prince has to strive for the fame and glory of his name, just as his great Byzantine predecessors did, as a Christian he will perceive his elevated position more as a burden than as a glory. Since temporal kingship is brief and the ultimate goal is the eternal kingdom, Neagoe reminds his son that the prince, like any other man, has a mortal body and will face death and the final judgment of the Supreme Lord. He should think only about the last hour of his life and consequently not boast about his origin or social position, for after death all men are alike:

Behold attentively in a grave and see those who lie there in it and tell who had been an Emperor and which are the bones of a king; see the frightful and terrifying image and the colour of the bones and therefore say, who was among these an Emperor, and who was a lord, or who was a noble, or who a servant, or rich, or poor, or old, or young, and who was ugly and who a beautiful man.⁴⁵

Thus, the honour of occupying the supreme position, to be the one elected by God to stand above all, is not emphasized in Neagoe's work; in this respect he is close to Agapetus and to other Byzantine works that follow in his tradition, such as the mirrors of Basil I (867–86)⁴⁶ and Manuel II (1397–1425),⁴⁷ where an emperor's humility is seen as one of

⁴⁴ Nicolae-Şerban Tanaşoca, 'Sfaturile Diaconului Agapet pentru împăratul Justinian', *Tabor: Revistă de cultură şi spiritualitate românească*, 2, 2003, 3, pp. 5–15, (p. 11.33). See also, Ihor Ševčenko, 'Agapetus East and West: The Fate of a Byzantine "Mirror for Princes"', in *Ideology, Letters and Culture in the Byzantine World*, London, 1982.

⁴⁵ Moisil et al. (eds), *Învățăturile lui Neagoe Basarab*, p. 312.35–40.

⁴⁶ Basil I, 'Kephalaia parainetica', in Migne, PG, vol. 107, cols 21–66. The only complete edition available to me was Migne's.

⁴⁷ Manuel II Paleologus, 'Hypothekai Basilikes agoges', in Migne, PG, vol. 156, cols 319–84.

his most important virtues. In their works too the vulnerability of the human condition is strongly emphasized,⁴⁸ and the privileged position of the *basileus* is referred to only to point out the numerous duties which he should fulfil and to remind him that he may be called an image of God only through the continuous exercising of all virtues: 'Only the one who is able to attain virtue will be rightfully called the image of God who has enthroned him.'⁴⁹

The theme of the frailty of the human condition is not limited to writings from the Byzantine world, it is encountered also in the Western tradition of the *specula principum*. From early works belonging to the genre, such as that of Sedulius Scotus written during the Carolingian period, until the end of the Middle Ages (Christine of Pizan), many authors warned princes against being proud of their earthly position, for the human condition is precarious, and for a bad prince there is no eternal life.⁵⁰

Neagoe's prince must not only be pious and wise, but also cultivated. The difference between *the education* of the ideal prince advocated by the (Western) humanists and that outlined in Neagoe's mirror lies in the curriculum. Neagoe's future prince has to be well versed in the Old and New Testaments, as well as the Fathers of the Church. These are the main sources from which *exempla* are drawn to illustrate the author's teachings.

The emphasis put on the importance of learning is typical of many Byzantine authors who wrote mirrors of princes. The mirror commissioned by Basil I taught his son that learning is an adornment for the Empire, being necessary for both emperors and common people, and that it is a disgrace for the state when its citizens are uneducated. Prescribing the Emperor's son a literary programme of study, the author urged him to study ancient history in order to learn from its examples.⁵¹ In his mirror, Manuel II Paleologus also used figures of classical antiquity to illustrate his teachings.⁵² However, the dominant sources from which the authors drew their moral advice were religious works, and holy writings were seen as the main nourishment of the soul. The same is characteristic of Carolingian mirrors. Later on, for instance, in John of Salisbury's *Policraticus*, religious sources were supplemented by the works of Plato,

⁴⁸ Basil I, for instance, in his chapter on modesty claims that humankind is nothing but dust. Basil I, 'Kephalaia parainetica', vol. 107, col. 28. D.

⁴⁹ Ibid., vol. 107, col. 32. B.

⁵⁰ Sedulius Scotus, 'De rectoribus christianis et convenientibus regulis quibus est res publica rite gubernanda', in *PL*, vol. 103, cols 306–17; Christine of Pizan, *The Book of the Body Politic*, ed. Kate Langdon Forhan, Cambridge, 1994, p. 12.

⁵¹ Basil I, 'Kephalaia parainetica', vol. 107, col. 49. C.

⁵² Manuel II Paleologus, 'Hypothekai Basilikes agoges', vol. 156, col. 328. D.

Cicero, Plutarch, Aristotle and other writers of classical antiquity. Thomas Aquinas, later on Christine of Pizan and most notably Erasmus acquainted their pupils with authors from pagan antiquity as well as with the Church Fathers. This switch from religious sources to classical writers changed the dominant religious note which was characteristic of early medieval Western mirrors. The change only took place, however, in Western Europe, for in the Byzantine mirrors, especially those that followed the tradition of Agapetus, the emphasis remained on religious sources. Nonetheless, nearly all authors of the genre considered that future princes should be cultivated. The difference lay in what teachings were presented as the most important.

In conclusion, Neagoe's mirror complies with the dominant template of the genre. One of its distinctive features is the overwhelming preeminence of religious considerations, since the salvation of a prince's soul takes precedence over all the other duties of a good prince. Neagoe's mirror is notably circumscribed by the bounds of Byzantine culture: its references are limited to religious works and popular romances such as *Barlaam and Josaphat* and the *Physiologus*, with no trace of authors of classical antiquity.

Princely instructions: normative versus pragmatic

Besides religious, moral and ethical precepts, the author of the Wallachian mirror included a set of practical instructions relating to the judicial, military and administrative aspects of governance. However, even in the chapters addressing pragmatic issues, the religious note remains dominant: politics is not separated from religion, and the model of the good ruler is offered mostly by reference to a Christian ideal.

The theme of war and peace is one of the few in which the author gave numerous detailed instructions to the future prince, in particular regarding the conduct of diplomacy and military affairs. A number of scholars have tended to relate the pragmatic aspects of Neagoe's *Teachings*, especially on these themes, to conditions at the time and present them as original and specific.⁵³ This was at odds with the traditional approach to the mirror of princes' literature, where the genre was normally treated as rhetorical, stereotyped and monolithic, evolving mostly in a timeless sphere. Some Western scholars in recent decades, however, have questioned the former approach, and there have been attempts to explain some instructions recorded in later works produced in Western Europe as stimulated by the social and political circumstances at the time these works were written.⁵⁴

⁵³ See, among others, Virgil Căndea, 'Primul monument al diplomației românești: Învățăturile lui Neagoe Basarab', in *Pagini din trecutul diplomației românești*, Virgil Căndea et al. (eds), Bucharest, 1966, pp. 100–13.

⁵⁴ Tang, 'Royal Misdemeanour', p. 100.

In Byzantium, although most of the *specula* have a distinctly rhetorical dimension, some authors, such as Kekaumenos⁵⁵ or Theophylact of Ohrid,⁵⁶ who wrote their works of advice in eleventh-century Byzantium, included critical allusions to the habits of the emperors of the time. So, with this in mind, by comparing the more pragmatic topics of Neagoe's work with other *specula principum* as well as with the circumstances of sixteenth-century Wallachia, I shall try to identify where and to what extent the rhetoric of the genre permits reflection on conditions at the time.

I will focus on the chapter of Neagoe's work addressing the topic of war and peace, a recurrent theme in both Western and Byzantine mirrors. Western mirrors have various approaches to the subject of war. Writing in the early Middle Ages, Smaragdus was in favour of peace first and foremost, and in the unfortunate circumstance that war could not be avoided the prince was to strengthen himself not in corporal exercises but in prayer, since in God's hands lay peace and victory.⁵⁷ On the other hand, in the high Middle Ages, it seems that Giles of Rome distanced himself so far from this opinion as to consider external war useful since it might serve to prevent internal dissension and strengthen civil harmony and consent.⁵⁸ Yet in the light of Christian doctrine, Giles's theory seems to be exceptional, and most of the authors of the genre advocated only defensive and just wars. The latter position is reflected substantially in the mirror of Christine of Pizan and Erasmus's well-known apology of peace. Erasmus adds the qualification, 'if indeed any war can really be called just', and advises his prince, if it is not possible to avoid war, at least to end it as quickly as possible and to spare Christian lives.⁵⁹

In Byzantium there was full consensus on the issue of war. Although war was seen as a necessary evil and the only war allowed was that in defence of the country, the prince was always required to be prepared for war.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ G. G. Litavrin (ed.), *Sovety i rasskazy Kekavmena: Socinenie Vizantiiskogo Polkovodca XI veka*, Moscow, 1972.

⁵⁶ Theophylact of Ohrid, 'Paideia Basilike', in *Théophilacte d'Achrida: Discours, traité, poesies*, ed. Paul Gautier, Thessalonike, 1980.

⁵⁷ Smaragdus, 'Via regia', in Migne, *PL*, vol. 102, col. 918.

⁵⁸ Michel Senellart, *Les arts de gouverner: Du regimen médiéval au concept de gouvernement*, Paris, 1995, p. 186.

⁵⁹ Desiderius Erasmus, *The Education of a Christian Prince*, ed. Lisa Jardine, Cambridge, 1997, p. 103.

⁶⁰ Joseph A. Munitiz, 'War and Peace Reflected in Some Byzantine Mirrors of Princes', in *Peace and War in Byzantium: Essays in Honor of George T. Dennis, S.J.*, eds Timothy S. Miller and John Nesbitt, Washington, D.C., 1995, p. 50.

Theophylact, in his long description contrasting the tyrant with the good prince, goes so far as to argue that a *basileus* who fails to organize an army to guard the state may be deemed as bad as a tyrant, and that although a good emperor should rely on God, who will provide him victories during war, he himself should always be prepared for war and even participate in battle. In times of peace he should exercise constantly and prepare himself together with his soldiers for all forms of conflict.⁶¹ Kekaumenos devoted an entire chapter to practical instructions about how to look after an army and how to strengthen a naval force, reminding his emperor that 'the army is the glory of the *basileus*, and the power of the palace'.⁶² Thus there was a continuity of thought in the Byzantine Empire regarding the duties of the emperor concerning war. Warfare was part and parcel of an emperor's life, even though he was at the same time advised to do everything possible for peace. Wars of aggression were condemned, or simply not mentioned, and a just war was placed under the jurisdiction of God.

Neagoe's mirror follows closely the tradition of the genre, as expressed in Byzantium. His prince shall love peace and do everything to acquire it. Consequently, diplomacy is preferable to war. With Christian and pagan envoys alike, the prince should strive for peace with soft words. If his peaceful words do not help, the prince ought not be haughty and prefer conflict, but buy peace with humility and as many goods as he is able to afford:

And if other kingdoms have more numerous armies and are mightier than you, you shall bow in front of them with humbleness and kind words. If you shall be able to quiet them down with soft words, this is God's help. But if they will not agree to comply with your gentle words, because of their lack of piety, you shall give such people riches, as much wealth as you can afford. Do not love times of conflict, and do not embrace deeds of vanity.⁶³

The author prescribes to the princely offspring a distinct treatment of Christian and pagan envoys. Before the latter the prince should avoid displaying any riches, as these persons are greedy and insatiable:

And those who are of other nations, who do not believe in our Lord Jesus Christ and in His most chaste Mother, they do not have as much wisdom,

⁶¹ Theophylact of Ohrid, 'Paideia Basilike', pp. 196.10, 200.10, 206.15–16.

⁶² Litavrin (ed.), *Sovety i rasskazy Kekavmena*, p. 292.16–17.

⁶³ George Mihăilă, (ed.), *Învățăturile lui Neagoe Basarab către fiul său Theodosie*, p. 306.

nor as much skill. Their only wisdom lies in a begging hand, waiting for alms and gifts, so that they may fill their mouths. And only so will you have peace and tranquillity. In front of those, you shall never show any of your riches, or your jewels, nor should you adorn your noblemen in front of them. Instead, you should pretend in front of them that you are miserable, and you shall not boast about anything.⁶⁴

When the ambition of the mighty cannot be bent by diplomacy or riches, the prince should, with God in mind, prepare himself for a just war, for death with honour is better than a shameful name. Although the author was not as concerned about war as about peace, he included instructions regarding war too. First and foremost, he, like the ante-Nicene Father of the Church Theognostius,⁶⁵ advised the future prince that he should entrust himself to the hands of God and consequently any outcome of war shall be seen as reward or punishment for his own behaviour:

And if you see that your noblemen leave the battle and that you are left alone, who will stay near you and keep on fighting? It is better, my children, to step aside, for their desertion is due to some sin of yours, or perhaps God is putting you to trial, to see how mightily and faithfully you are devoted to Him, for God's judgments are many and cannot be reckoned. Therefore, do not despair, do not fear being left alone, nor utter blasphemy against God, but give praise to the Lord, for even if your noblemen have left, God will never leave you.⁶⁶

However, the author included pragmatic instructions as well. He emphasized that wealth is essential in times of war, so the future prince should always carry his treasure with him and reward the bravery of his soldiers:

And the treasure from which you shall reward your soldiers shall be next to you, since the prince in distress first and foremost has to have a rich fortune to reward his army. For man is like a dove: wherever the dove finds much food, thereto it runs.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 302.

⁶⁵ The extant fragments of Theognostius's work were published by Joseph A. Munitiz (ed.), *Theognosti Thesaurus*, Turnhout and Louvain, 1979, p. 19.3.

⁶⁶ Mihăilă (ed.), *Învățăturile lui Neagoe Basarab către fiul său Theodosie*, p. 318.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 320.

During battle, the prince should not be in the front line but, surrounded by the high nobility, be positioned marginally in such a way as to be protected and hidden from the enemy. As long as the high nobility back the prince, he should not fear when the lesser knights were scattered and ran away. By contrast, if the ruler realizes that the most important noblemen have deserted him, he should abandon the battle. In this case the prince should not flee his own country, because nothing is worse than a life in exile.

As can be seen, in direct contrast to Byzantine writers, Neagoe's mirror does not emphasize his kingdom's mightiness and recognizes its inferiority in comparison with his enemies. It stresses the necessity of buying peace by any means, even at the price of the prince's humiliation. These thoughts seem to reflect the sixteenth-century Wallachian atmosphere. The author's instructions to buy peace with all means, to share his goods with those more powerful than himself, and even to humiliate himself, were the traditional practices of most Wallachian princes in their relationships with stronger neighbours such as the Hungarian kingdom or the Ottoman Empire. It may be tempting to draw the conclusion that in this case there was indeed an adaptation of general political instructions to the Wallachian political circumstances.

However, certain specific precepts present in the Neagoe's *speculum* may suggest an alternative reading. For instance, the requirement that the prince have his treasure always at hand in order to be able to pay his soldiers brings us closer to a mercenary army more typical of the Byzantine Empire than of early-sixteenth-century Wallachia.⁶⁸ In this respect Neagoe's comparison of soldiers to doves who always flock around those who give them food is similar to that of Kekaumenos, who advised his *basileus* to take care of his army since otherwise they would go where they could find more food.⁶⁹ Similarly, Neagoe's instructions that the future prince should avoid being in the vanguard but stay farther away, watching the battle from a distance, comports with the advice of Theophylact, who instructed his *basileus* to go to the battle and watch from afar everything which happened there, but to avoid the danger of dying like a simple soldier.⁷⁰ Further on, the motif of defeat as a consequence of the sins of princes constitutes a recurrent theme in the Old Testament's treatment of lost wars, which was

⁶⁸ Land endowments from the early sixteenth century frequently attest to the duty of peasants to answer the call of arms of the prince. See, for instance, DRH B Vol. 2 nr. 87 (1511), nr. 98 (1512), nr. 193 (1520). Moreover, Iorga has pointed out that mercenary armies had not yet come into use in Neagoe's Wallachia. See Iorga, *Învățăturile*, p. 6.

⁶⁹ Litavrin (ed.), *Sovety i rasskazy Kekavmena*, p. 279.5.

⁷⁰ Theophylact of Ohrid, 'Paideia Basilike', p. 20.15.

also touched on by Theognosius. It has been suggested that the advice given to the princely scion not to display his wealth when receiving envoys from pagan powers might again be a reflection of Wallachian practices. However, the same advice can be found in the fifteenth chapter of the first part of the *Teachings* which Zamfirescu identified as a retelling of the story of Hezekiah.⁷¹ It is highly debatable, therefore, whether the pragmatic instructions given to the future prince have any connection with sixteenth-century circumstances.

Conclusions

In this article I have analysed the *Teachings of Neagoe Basarab to His Son Theodosie*, locating it in the context of Eastern and Western mirrors of princes. Although in some previous studies the Wallachian mirror had already been assigned to the genre of *specula principum*, many researchers favoured a reading of the *Teachings* as a unique and original text. In this context, the present study claims that a comparative analysis allows for a better approach to this Wallachian text.

The sixteenth-century mirror is strongly anchored in the culture and political thought of Byzantium, in the way that these survived in Slavonic culture after the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople. The developments that shaped the political thought of Latin Europe from John of Salisbury onwards have no parallel, either in the Slavonic-Byzantine world or in the Wallachian mirror. Neagoe, like his Byzantine or Carolingian predecessors in the genre, does not seem to be aware of any other theory of the state except for the classic theme of *mimesis theou*: the earthly kingdom is but a replica of the heavenly one. There are no limits to princely power save that he should continuously exercise the entire catalogue of prescribed virtues.

In respect to the list of virtues suited to a future ruler, Neagoe's *speculum* does not strike a discordant note in the context of the Byzantine and Western mirrors and joins them in displaying a full list of the cardinal and Christian virtues. The emphasis placed on Christian virtues adds to the deeply religious atmosphere of Neagoe's work that places it close to certain Byzantine *specula*, such as those of the emperors Basil I or Manuel II Paleologus. In Western Europe it has its counterparts mainly in items written in the early medieval period.

⁷¹ As told in Isaiah 39, Hezekiah was imprudent enough to display his wealth in front of the envoys of the Babylonians, whereupon they returned with mighty armies and destroyed both Hezekiah and Jerusalem. See Dan Zamfirescu, 'Studiu introductiv', in Moisiil et al. (eds), *Învățăturile lui Neagoe Basarab*, pp. 32–33.

The cultural changes occurring in Western Europe in the high Middle Ages are reflected in the literature of the genre. While the Western authors of *specula* supplemented the religious sources with works of classical antiquity, it seems that the only non-religious works available to the author of Neagoe's mirror are texts such as *Physiologus* or the popular story of Alexander the Great. Consequently, the political thought, the culture and the readings of the author of Neagoe's work show clearly that the cultural developments specific for the later Western Middle Ages did not reach the Slavonic-Byzantine world for which the *Teachings* were produced. This is consistent with the general trend characteristic of the development of cladOrthodox culture.⁷²

I have also addressed the controversy related to the specificity of the mirror of princes' genre, whether (or to what extent) Neagoe's *speculum* reflects the historical and social circumstances of the time. Several authors have brought forward convincing arguments that in the Latin West, starting in the fourteenth century, many *specula* mirror the world in which they had been created. However, the pragmatic chapters of Neagoe's mirror, presented as original and specific by many scholars, follow closely the guidelines of the genre as developed in the Byzantine world. The analysis of the theme of diplomacy and war does not allow us to draw connections between the ideas expressed in the text and contemporary Wallachian circumstances. The mirror is situated in its era not by the substance of its advice, but by the template and the sources of the Byzantine-Slavonic literature to which it is both indebted and confined.

⁷² Ševčenko, 'Byzantium and the Slavs', p. 303.